# Ottawa and the West

## Reflections on the Western Economic Opportunities Conference of 1973

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Cover photo: "Premier Lougheed confronts John Turner during the second day of the conference," *Calgary Herald*, July 26, 1973. Photo used courtesy of the Glenbow Archives (NA-2864-23512).

# BUILDING THE NEW WEST

This report is part of the Canada West Foundation's Building the New West Project, a multi-year research and public consultation initiative focused on the strategic positioning of western Canada within the global economy.

Five key priorities emerged from an extensive research and consultation process and provide a framework for the Building the New West Project:

- the West must create the tools to attract, retain and build HUMAN CAPITAL;
- the West must continue ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION;
- the West must strengthen its TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE;
- the West must promote the global competitiveness of its MAJOR CITIES; and
- the West must develop new ways of facilitating REGIONAL COORDINATION.

To learn more about the BNW Project, please visit the Canada West Foundation website (www.cwf.ca).

This report was prepared by Canada West Foundation President and CEO Dr. Roger Gibbins and Senior Policy Analyst Robert Roach. The opinions expressed in this document are the authors' only and are not necessarily held in full or in part by the Canada West Foundation's donors, subscribers, advisors, or Board.

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## *Executive Summary*

On October 17, 2003, the Canada West Foundation hosted a Calgary conference at the Kahanoff Centre to mark the 30th anniversary of the 1973 Western Economic Opportunities Conference (WEOC). *Ottawa and the West: Reflections on the Western Economic Opportunities Conference of 1973* was designed to assess the WEOC experience, and to explore the future engagement of the federal government in the western Canadian economy.

WEOC brought together Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and the four western premiers of the day – Manitoba's Edward Schreyer, Saskatchewan's Allan Blakeney, Alberta's Peter Lougheed, and British Columbia's David Barrett. Over 300 delegates attended this first of its kind Calgary event. In the end, however, WEOC was generally seen as a disappointment. It did not address western Canadian discontent and indeed may even have exacerbated it. WEOC did not produce a new national policy that would foster economic development and diversification in western Canada. If anything, the relationship between the federal and western provincial governments became more conflicted.

Yet in many other respects, WEOC left an important and more positive imprint on the western Canadian political landscape. It brought British Columbia together with the prairie provinces, led to the creation of the annual Western Premiers' Conference, and helped foster a good deal of interprovincial cooperation. WEOC also marked the emergence of the "New West" on the national stage, signaling greater regional self-confidence and national profile. While WEOC did not solve many problems, it heightened national awareness of both regional discontent and the potential contribution of the West to the national economy.

Beyond reflecting on the WEOC experience, participants at the *Ottawa and the West* conference explored the future of federal government engagement with the regional economy. Although it was acknowledged that the economic and public policy landscapes had changed substantially since 1973, the importance of the federal role has not diminished. Moreover, many of the same economic challenges remain, and they remain entangled in a largely dysfunctional political relationship between the West and the federal government. As a positive step to improve both national economic policy and the political relationships upon which it rests, the Canada West Foundation recommends that shortly after the next general election, the Government of Canada convene WEOC II – an event that could provide the model for similar meetings with the Atlantic provinces and northern territories.

## *Introduction*

Former Premier of BC David Barrett and Former Premier of Saskatchewan Allan Blakeney

On October 17, 2003, the Canada West Foundation hosted a Calgary conference at the Kahanoff Centre to mark the 30th anniversary of the 1973 Western Economic Opportunities Conference (WEOC). *Ottawa and the West: Reflections on the Western Economic Opportunities Conference of 1973* was attended by almost 100 participants drawn from WEOC veterans, public servants, and members of the public policy community. (See Appendices A and B for the conference program and list of participants.) The conference was designed to reflect on the WEOC experience, and to explore the future engagement of the federal government in the western Canadian economy.

The architecture of this report follows the design principles of the conference. The first section provides an overview of the 1973 WEOC, thereby setting the stage for the discussion to follow.[1] The second section provides an assessment of WEOC, drawing from both commentary at the time and the reflections of participants at the *Ottawa and the West* conference. The third section looks ahead to the future of Ottawa's engagement with the western Canadian economy, as did the conference participants, and the fourth section wraps up with some concluding observations and the recommendation that a second WEOC be launched by the federal government following the upcoming federal election.

## *The 1973 Western Economic Opportunities Conference*

> This Conference at Calgary signifies the Government of Canada's belief that, a century after the old national policy, we can now together begin shaping a new national policy to strengthen Canada by achieving more balanced and diversified regional growth throughout the country.
>
> – Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, Opening Statement at WEOC

Proposed in the January 1973 federal Throne Speech and held in July of the same year, the "one and only" Western Economic Opportunities Conference brought together the prime minister, the premiers of the four western provinces, several future western premiers, two future prime ministers, and other key regional and national players to discuss the federal government's role in the economic development of the West. The conference was a potentially pivotal event in the evolution of the relationship between the federal government and western Canada, for it took place at a time when western Canadians were on the cusp of dramatic economic, political, and social change. In many ways this period, which saw the emergence of the "New West," is analogous to the current scene where again a prosperous, growing, and dynamic region is testing its place in the Canadian federation.

1. This section of the report draws heavily on the background paper prepared by Robert Roach for the 2003 conference, *An (In)Auspicious Gathering: The Western Economic Opportunities Conference of 1973* (Calgary: Canada West Foundation, 2003). The background paper is available for download at www.cwf.ca

## The Political Context of WEOC

> The concerns of the West are more than a matter of dollars, or job security, or even economic opportunity, important as these are. It's a feeling of western Canadians that we have a great deal going for us in the West, but we feel frustrated in reaching out for our potential because we sense such potential is not fully understood or appreciated in central Canada and hence, we are thwarted by federal government policies.
>
> – Alberta Premier Peter Lougheed at WEOC

CWF President Roger Gibbins and Former Minister of Alberta Federal and Intergovernmental Affairs Louis Hyndman

The representational void created by the tendency of westerners to elect MPs from opposition parties (see Figure 1), the constraints of party discipline, an ineffective Senate, and a federal bureaucracy centralized in Ottawa were all becoming more apparent and problematic as the federal government expanded its economic and social roles in the 1960s and 1970s. The alienation rooted in John A. Macdonald's National Policy and the federal government's sketchy record in the region was deepening as longstanding western grievances remained unresolved and new ones were forming. Prime Minister Trudeau himself was certainly aware of the problem created by the lack of effective western Canadian representation within the federal government, and referred to it at WEOC:

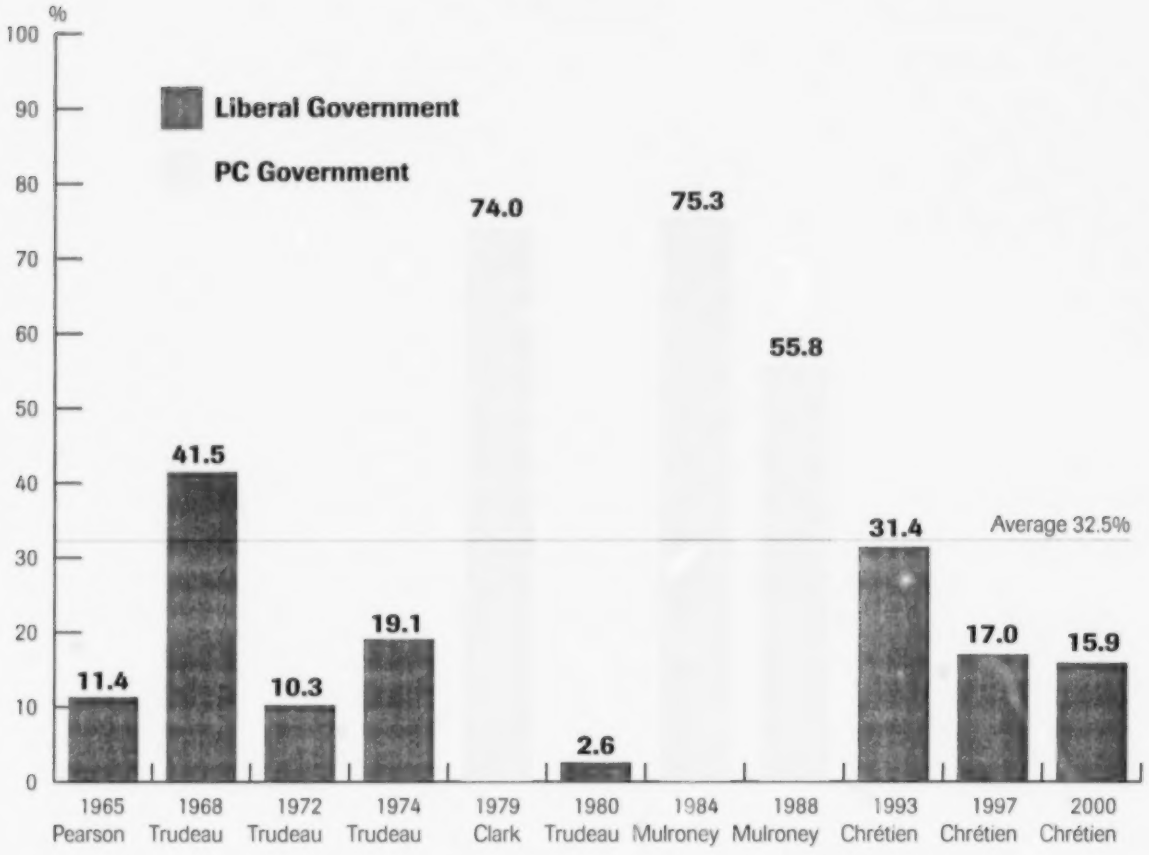
> When westerners speak of alienation, I know they refer not solely to the lack of economic opportunity. Many are at least as concerned with the "lack of leverage" in national decision-making. They want a stronger voice in national affairs.

As the federal government was increasing its reach into the lives of Canadians, the provinces were also expanding the depth and range of their activities. This further increased the likelihood of clashes between the two orders of government as each tested the equilibrium of the evolving federal order. As a result,

> the provinces [became] more aggressive in their demands for consultation prior to the enactment of federal legislation in areas of provincial jurisdiction and in areas of federal jurisdiction that have a direct impact on the provinces. This change in posture on the part of the provinces...necessitated the creation of specialized agencies and secretariats to facilitate regularized consultation between the two levels of government as well as the establishment of more frequent and more regularized channels for inter-provincial communication (Westmacott and Dore 341).

WEOC constituted a huge symbolic step by the federal government in this direction, albeit a step that brought with it the risk of failing to meet elevated expectations.

**Figure 1:**
**Percentage of Western MPs on the Government Side of the House, 1965-2000**




On the provincial front, four new premiers were elected in the West between 1969 and 1972, and the strategic value of interprovincial cooperation was becoming clearer:

> Prior to 1968, there had been virtually no attempt on the part of the four Western provinces to present a "Western Canadian" position at federal-provincial conferences with the expectation that such a posture would ultimately strengthen the West's bargaining position. [However,] the change in political leadership facilitated greater intergovernmental cooperation among the four governments. Each of the premiers indicated a greater willingness than his predecessor to set aside partisan and personality differences in the hope that a regional policy could be developed (Westmacott and Dore 344-345).

The Trudeau Liberals' narrow victory in the 1972 election (109 Liberal, 107 Progressive Conservative, and 31 NDP seats) combined with the fact that the Liberals lost significant ground in the West (a drop from 27 western Liberal MPs as of the 1968 election to just 7 in 1972) added to an already volatile political mix. It was thus an opportune time for innovation, for new regional voices and new channels through which such voices could be expressed.

## Preparing for WEOC

> Mr. Prime Minister, we do not seek handouts. We will certainly appreciate a helping hand, but even that is not our primary purpose here. What we are really asking for is that you free our hands of the shackles of history which deny us the fulfillment of our destiny.
>
> – Saskatchewan Premier Allan Blakeney at WEOC

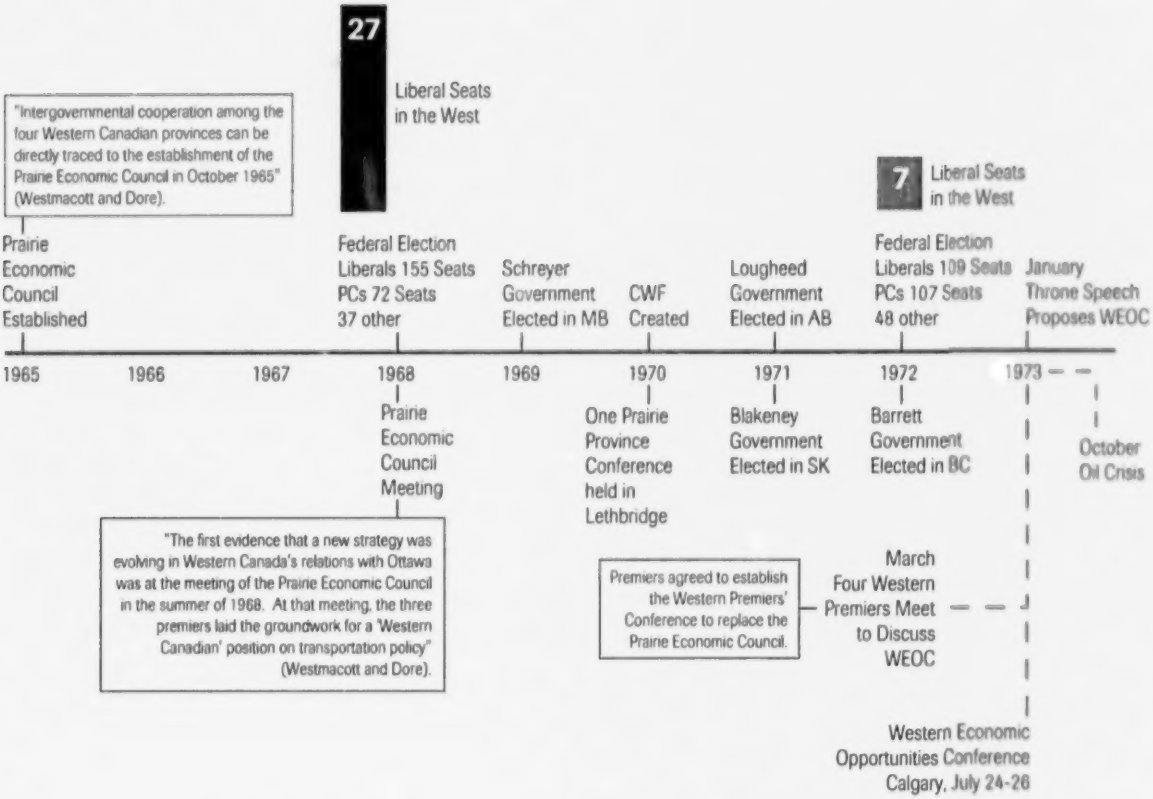
The Western Economic Opportunities Conference was announced in the federal Throne Speech of January 4, 1973:

> The Government will propose to the Governments of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba that they join with it in the convening of a conference on western economic opportunities. Such a conference would be a unique venture in the history of federal-provincial relations in Canada. It could be jointly planned, and held in the West in the course of the summer. Its purpose would be to explore potentials for economic and social development and, specifically, to consider concrete programs for stimulating and broadening the economic and industrial base of western Canada (Government of Canada 1973).

CWF Board Member Dr. J. Peter Meekison, James Eldridge (Government of Manitoba), Oryssia Lennie (Western Economic Diversification), Dr. Gregory Marchildon (University of Regina)

Never before had the federal government called a meeting with a subset of provinces to discuss regional concerns, and the chance to discuss western issues "was an opportunity that the West could not pass by" (Blakeney 241). The four western provinces agreed to participate and began working together in preparation for the conference. Interestingly, this flowering of interprovincial cooperation took place at a time when the economic and social ties that traditionally held the region together were fraying. Even among the Prairie provinces the common bonds of the wheat economy were beginning to unravel in the face of economic diversification and urbanization (Gibbins). Somewhat ironically, the federal government itself provided the essential regional glue. Although not the only remaining tie binding the western provinces together, alienation from Ottawa and, to some degree, the rest of Canada, was a key factor explaining the regional cohesiveness of the New West. As Allan Blakeney has

## Figure 2:
## The Political Context of WEOC


27
Liberal Seats in the West
"Intergovernmental cooperation among the four Western Canadian provinces can be directly traced to the establishment of the Prairie Economic Council in October 1965" (Westmacott and Dore).
7
Liberal Seats in the West
Prairie Economic Council Established
Federal Election Liberals 155 Seats PCs 72 Seats 37 other
Schreyer Government Elected in MB
CWF Created
Lougheed Government Elected in AB
Federal Election Liberals 109 Seats PCs 107 Seats 48 other
January Throne Speech Proposes WEOC
1965
1966
1967
1968
1969
1970
1971
1972
1973
Prairie Economic Council Meeting
"The first evidence that a new strategy was evolving in Western Canada's relations with Ottawa was at the meeting of the Prairie Economic Council in the summer of 1968. At that meeting, the three premiers laid the groundwork for a 'Western Canadian' position on transportation policy" (Westmacott and Dore).
One Prairie Province Conference held in Lethbridge
Premiers agreed to establish the Western Premiers' Conference to replace the Prairie Economic Council.
Blakeney Government Elected in SK
Barrett Government Elected in BC
March Four Western Premiers Meet to Discuss WEOC
October Oil Crisis
Western Economic Opportunities Conference Calgary, July 24-26

pointed out, "people in the four western provinces tend to have a common perception of Canada and what Confederation is all about" (Blakeney 239).

A key change in the months prior to WEOC was the willingness of British Columbia to join forces with the Prairie provinces. Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba had been quietly working together since the creation of the Prairie Economic Council in 1965, but the Social Credit premier of BC at the time, W.A.C. Bennett, was not a supporter of western interprovincial solidarity. Indeed, he argued that BC should be seen as its own region, that it was better off standing alone rather than aligning itself with the Prairies. However, the newly elected NDP Premier David Barrett was more open to forging a regional consensus, and he joined the three Prairie premiers in preparing common positions for presentation to the federal government at WEOC. As Barrett stated at the 2003 CWF conference:

> WEOC was a chance to break the xenophobic nature of BC politics, and to see BC as our home and Canada as our country. WEOC psychologically brought BC back into Confederation. The freeze-out was over. It was a tremendous psychological breakthrough.

The Hon. Ralph Goodale, Federal Minister of Public Works and Government Services

In March 1973, the four western premiers met in Winnipeg, renamed the Prairie Economic Council the Western Economic Council to include BC (following WEOC, the Council morphed into the annual Western Premiers' Conference), and began preparing common position papers on transportation, economic and industrial development opportunities, agriculture, and capital financing and regional financial institutions. Allan Blakeney describes this process as "a struggle" to overcome provincial differences that was ultimately successful (Blakeney 241). By June, four policy papers had been completed and, with the endorsement of all four provincial governments, were forwarded to Ottawa (Westmacott and Dore 347).

This pre-emptive move was important because there was a sense among the western premiers that the federal government planned to use WEOC to highlight federal initiatives rather than to listen to western concerns. There was also a belief that Trudeau expected the four premiers to be divided by ideological and provincial differences, and that this would allow him to showcase the federal government's regional policies while the premiers squabbled among themselves. As Lougheed recalls:

> Remember, Trudeau had almost lost an election; his party had very few seats in the West. I guess they decided to make a show of responding to the West and they probably believed they would look good at the expense of the four western provinces. ...I think Ottawa sat down and decided "Well look, we've got three socialist governments out there. There's Barrett, NDP; there's the Schreyer NDP government in Manitoba and there's the Blakeney NDP government in Saskatchewan. Then there's that odd-ball Conservative Lougheed. They'll never get a long, so why don't we call a conference with the four western provinces? They'll be so divided that we'll look like the only people who can hope to resolve the problems of the West (Wood 107-108).

Therefore a key element of the pre-WEOC provincial strategy was the decision to table potentially divisive topics and focus on areas of agreement. Differences among the four provinces were resolved or at least addressed behind closed doors rather than being aired in public at the conference. Lougheed explains:

> We knew that Trudeau's idea was to divide and conquer, so we developed a strategy for the agenda. We figured that first of all the federal government would want to put energy on the agenda, and all four of us agreed that it was not the time for energy discussions. We agreed to do that later (Wood 108).

As David Barrett described at the *Ottawa and the West* conference: "The openness, cooperation and frankness among the premiers during the preparations for WEOC were just terrific; we were well-prepared for the conference, and Trudeau was not." As a consequence, WEOC was "the first occasion on which the federal government entered into discussions with a regional grouping of provinces that were united behind a common position on a broad range of issues" (Westmacott and Dore 347).

## The Conference

> Unfortunately, present day federal government policies still encourage the concentration of the country's business, industry and financial capital...in central Canada.
>
> – British Columbia Premier David Barrett at WEOC

WEOC was held in Calgary at Mount Royal College. The meeting was chaired by Prime Minister Trudeau and attended by over 300 delegates and official observers (see Appendix C for a list of participants). The four western provincial delegations were led by the premiers of the day: David Barrett (BC), Peter Lougheed (Alberta), Allan Blakeney (Saskatchewan), and Edward Schreyer (Manitoba). Among the many notable participants were future prime ministers John Turner and Jean Chrétien, and future premiers Don Getty and Roy Romanow. The three-day event was televised and received considerable media attention.

The main theme of the conference was the diversification of the western Canadian economy ("stimulating and broadening the economic and industrial base of western Canada"). This general theme was divided into five topic areas: objectives for the West; transportation; industrial and commercial development; capital financing and financial institutions; and agriculture.

There was a shared assumption on the part of both the federal and provincial governments that the West lagged behind central Canada in terms of economic development, and that policy levers could be used to increase the amount of value-added manufacturing in the region. Changing freight rate policy, for example, was seen as a way not only to address a western grievance, but to create the conditions necessary for more value-added production in the West.

Premier Blakeney summarizes the West's demands at WEOC as follows:

1. Canada needs a conscious national policy for regional development;
2. Canada's national transportation system should be used as a deliberate tool for regional development; and
3. Canada needs national policies to bring greater stability for producers of primary products (Blakeney 242).

Dr. Raymond Blake (Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy), Dr. Graham Parsons (Organisation for Western Economic Cooperation), Dr. Allan Tupper (University of BC), Dr. Paul Boothe (University of Alberta)

The details of the discussions can be found in *A Report on the Western Economic Opportunities Conference*, prepared by the Canada West Foundation and published a few months after the conference in November 1973. (For the more zealous historian, the federal government has published a verbatim record of the proceedings.)

There is no question that the conference debate was open and frank. At the same time, tension was evident throughout, as shown in a conference intervention by Manitoba Premier Edward Schreyer: "This discussion in the last thirty minutes, if I may say so, with respect, has deteriorated partly because there seems to be a lack of communication. Despite the fact that we are talking, there isn't much communication." Assessments thirty years later were unchanged; as Allan Blakeney stated at the *Ottawa and the West* conference, "We did not get through. It didn't work. We didn't penetrate the barrier of a lack of knowledge and sensitivity."

The western premiers approached the meeting with high expectations; they wanted "concrete policy proposals that would alleviate Western grievances" (Westmacott and Dore 346). These expectations are evident in a speech given by Premier Lougheed a few months before WEOC:

> ...if [WEOC] turns out to be merely talk and there are not concrete results, it will be a setback for Canada. In social and unity terms, a western region charging forth on all cylinders as a full participant in Canada surely has to be a positive factor for Canadian unity. And in economic terms, the realization by western Canadians of their full potential can benefit all Canadians. So this July conference in Calgary provides a unique opportunity to make historic changes. All of Canada, and central Canada in particular, should be supporting the national government in policy commitments which will make the conference a success. It will only be a success if there is a commitment to action. A mere agreement to consider will not be enough (Lougheed).

These high expectations were not met. The image of Trudeau hitting the gavel at the close of the conference and saying "Well, thus ends the one and only Western Economic Opportunities Conference" has come to symbolize the federal government's – particularly Trudeau's – failure to understand the New West. It was also a watershed in a deteriorating political relationship between Ottawa and the West.

## *Reflections on WEOC*

> In summary and on balance, I would have to regretfully conclude that the responses by the federal government were disappointing...I have to give you full marks for calling the Conference and working at it...but for some reason that is a complete mystery to me...we haven't yet got through either the spirit or the potential of the West. Frankly, we would have forsaken any federal dollars, any federal programs...in exchange for understanding.
>
> – Alberta Premier Peter Lougheed, Closing Statement at WEOC

In the immediate post-conference period, assessments of WEOC were generally negative. The premiers wanted the new national policy Trudeau mentioned in his opening address, but they didn't get it. Instead, Trudeau "punctuated his final address with non-committal phrases such as 'the federal government and the provinces should intensify discussions and reciprocate consultation on major areas of current concern'" (Westmacott and Dore 348). Simply put, the provinces were asking for more than the federal government was prepared to give. As Elton (351) notes:

> the meeting fell far short of attaining the expectations of either the federal or provincial governments. Rather than setting the stage for what the federal Throne Speech referred to as "concrete programs for stimulating and broadening the economic and industrial base of Western Canada," the meeting ended with few concrete accomplishments.

Blakeney reinforces this sense of failure: "...WEOC failed to bring us much closer to the goal then enunciated by the Prime Minister – a new 'National Policy'" (242). Perhaps the only upbeat voice in the room was that of Prime Minister Trudeau, who noted in his closing comments at WEOC that "...I couldn't help notice...the word "disappointment" or some equivalent word appeared in almost every one of the evaluations. But I must confess that I don't feel crushed by that." Perhaps the relationship between Ottawa and the West might have taken on a more constructive tone had the Prime Minister shared the disappointment of the western premiers.

CWF Chairman Jim Gray and CWF Board Member Jim Hume

If one of the goals of WEOC was to mitigate emerging feelings of regional discontent, this goal was not met. However, disappointment on this front should not be equated with a lack of significance, for in many ways WEOC left a major imprint on the western Canadian political landscape. In the words of Louis Hyndman, speaking at the *Ottawa and the West* conference, "Expectations were high and few were realized at the time, but seeds were planted and new thinking began that over 30 years has changed our federation."

Headlines that appeared in the *Calgary Herald* and *Globe and Mail* at the time of the conference point to the tense nature of the discussions and the lack of progress made at WEOC:

- Trudeau won't give ground
- WEOC a disappointment
- Ottawa misunderstands
- Ottawa vs. the West at Mount Royal College
- The mood was 'confrontation'
- As far as a sense of mutual belonging or brotherliness was concerned, yesterday's talks at Mount Royal College might just as well have been the world disarmament talks or the Nixon-Brezhnev summit
- Trudeau arrives happy, a good day ahead; From then on, it was down hill
- Lougheed takes the hard line
- Lougheed, Turner, square off over tariffs
- Premiers find WEOC useful but limited: No vast changes in store for West
- West is disappointed
- Meeting becomes clipped exchange over freight rates
- Premiers wrangle with Ottawa
- Premiers, Trudeau fail to agree on issue of rail freight rates
- Western talks missed goals, premiers say
- Trudeau called western meeting 'one and only'

## Political Emergence of the New West

There was a clear recognition at the 2003 *Ottawa and the West* conference that WEOC marked the "coming out" of the New West, the emergence of the region as a full if somewhat contentious player on the national stage. The West had been transformed from a geographical region to a political region, and one that included British Columbia. This transformation, moreover, was internal as much as it was a change to the region's external projection. In the words of Louis Hyndman, "WEOC changed the way the West looked at itself."

## Strained Relations

The failure of WEOC to create a new national policy set the tone for subsequent relations between the federal government and the western provinces; additional WEOCs were not held, the provinces concluded that the federal

government was not willing to fully address the region's concerns, and the federal government became frustrated with a disgruntled West. Writing in the late 1980s, Elton goes so far as to say that:

> The opening shots of the decade-long battle between the western provinces and Ottawa were taken at the July 1973 Western Economic Opportunities Conference. While the four position papers presented to the federal government by the western premiers detailed western grievances ... the federal government's lack of response made it clear that there would be little change. National policies and programs which had frustrated westerners for so long would not undergo any fundamental changes. Thus, when the additional frustrations brought on by conflicts over resource revenues, which emerged within weeks of WEOC in September, 1973, were added to the list of western grievances, a recipe for outright hostilities had been created (Elton 353).

CWF Senior Policy Analyst Robert Roach

It is important to note that the tone set at WEOC was experienced first-hand by the participants, many of whom went on to play critical roles in the evolution of federal-provincial relations. The impressions they took away with them likely played a major part in the push and pull of intergovernmental relations over the next 30 years. WEOC was an interpersonal event and politics is very much about interpersonal relationships – both good and bad.

At the same time, it would be unfair to attribute all of the conflict to come, including that surrounding the National Energy Program, to the failure of WEOC. As Allan Blakeney argued at the 2003 CWF conference, "Once the export tax on oil was imposed and the 1974 Turner budget came down, I don't think any amount of goodwill built up by WEOC would have survived those events." Moreover, while WEOC may not have resolved western grievances, it did help elevate them on the national agenda. Here it is useful to note Oryssia Lennie's comment at the *Ottawa and the West* conference:

> Some say WEOC set a combative tone for future federal-provincial relations, and that may be the case. But it also had a positive effect by elevating the consciousness of western grievances and concerns. WEOC helped make the West a vibrant voice in Confederation.

## Interprovincial Cooperation

If WEOC seems a failure when viewed through a federal-provincial lens, the assessment is much more positive when WEOC is viewed through an interprovincial lens. At the *Ottawa and the West* conference, Dr. Peter Meekison suggested that the most important outcome of WEOC was the establishment of the Western Premiers' Conference and the interprovincial cooperation it has engendered. As Blakeney notes:

> [Preparing for WEOC] was a valuable exercise, though not always an easy one. It made us face realities. It encouraged us to cut down areas of competition and conflict amongst ourselves in the interests of the region as a whole. It forced us to consider our specific grievances within a broader framework for development of the region. ...And, as a result of our close collaboration in preparing for the Conference, personal rapport developed among the Premiers, Ministers and officials of the four western governments. Many of these personal relationships endure today, and a habit of close consultation and co-operation among the four western provinces has developed. It would be difficult to argue that WEOC succeeded in changing the direction of federal policies, but its impact on western provincial co-operation was substantial (242).

Blakeney's assessment at the 2003 CWF conference stressed the same conclusion: "WEOC was a trailblazing example of interprovincial cooperation; it caused us to raise our sights and showed us what we could accomplish if we worked together." The legacy of this initial cooperation remains today in the form of annual meetings of the western premiers and a broad range of interprovincial initiatives (see Fox and Roach for a list of examples). Although the main thrust of this cooperation has been directed toward improving the West's ability to influence federal policy by acting as a bloc, interprovincial cooperation in areas of provincial jurisdiction has also benefited from the groundwork established by WEOC.

Dr. Manuel Mertin, Dean, Faculty of Arts, Mount Royal College

The WEOC experience also demonstrated the growing importance of intergovernmental relations secretariats in the West, and was a stimulus for their future growth. Indeed, it was the establishment of such offices that gave the western provinces the capacity to set the WEOC agenda and provide the policy papers.

Finally, it should be noted that interprovincial collaboration within the West is linked to successful influence on the national stage. As Jim Eldridge explained at the *Ottawa and the West* conference:

> The West includes a lot of the pressures regionally that the whole country has nationally. See if you can resolve it first here, and if you can, they you can take a really big club onto the national stage. Tests here add legitimacy to the provincial voice when it gets onto the national stage.

### Growing Importance of Executive Federalism

Rising alienation rooted in the chronic lack of an effective western Canadian voice within the national government created conditions ripe for greater involvement on the part of the western provinces in federal affairs. In a paper written

in the late 1970s that cites WEOC as a milestone in the use of federal-provincial conferences as vehicles for voicing regional issues to the federal government, Gordon Robertson notes that:

> It is partly because we have lacked an effective forum for open regional advocacy and brokerage within our institutions at the federal level of government that provincial premiers and ministers have been assuming more and more the role of regional commentators and critics in areas of federal jurisdiction (227).

WEOC highlighted the lack of western Canadian representation within the federal government and provided an opportunity for western premiers to fill this void with their voices. It introduced the premiers as important, indeed essential voices in the construction of *national* policies, a situation that continues as there has been no structural reform to increase western Canadian voices within the national government.

Wayne Helgason,
Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg

To conclude, although only a small number of people today may have heard of WEOC, it ushered in a new era of federal-provincial relations, established the annual Western Premiers' Conference, shaped the perceptions and attitudes of dozens of political and bureaucratic decision-makers (many of whom are still active in government circles), and marked the rise of a "New West" hungry for economic development and a reformed federation. In many ways, however, WEOC is as important for what it did not do as for what it did do. WEOC did not lead to the new national policy Trudeau referred to in his opening statement. It was not the beginning of a new and improved relationship between the region's provincial governments and the national government, and it was not an effective tonic for western alienation. On the contrary, it set a combative tone for federal-provincial relations that continues today, and underscored the stubborn gulf between the country's western hinterland and its political centre.

## *Looking Forward*

> The federal side saw [WEOC] largely as an unprincipled gang-up against the Government of Canada. And the provinces largely saw the federal government as remote, obtuse and unyielding. And the angst and the anguish of western alienation remain today.
>
> – The Hon. Ralph Goodale at the Ottawa and the West Conference

The discussions at the 2003 *Ottawa and the West* conference on the future engagement of the federal government in the western Canadian economy took place in a very different environment from that of 1973. The West's share of the national population has increased, from just over 27% to 30%, and there has been a corresponding increase in the region's share

CWF Board Member Roy Lloyd and Gael MacLeod, Executive Director, Alberta Real Estate Foundation

of the country's GDP. The West enjoys both prosperity and strong economic growth. The region has also emerged as an important part of Canada's urban heartland, with levels of urbanization on par with the national average.[2] Interprovincial trade has become proportionately less important to the regional economy, and international trade much more so (Roach 2002).

These changes are reflected in the way in which western Canadians see the world, and see themselves. In the words of Jim Gray, who opened the 2003 CWF conference, "the West has moved from the insecurities of adolescence to the security of adulthood."

Of course, there are also patterns of continuity that reach across the past thirty years. Note, for example, Allan Blakeney's comments at the *Ottawa and the West* conference:

> There have been profound changes in the West since 1973, but we remain dependent on the export of resource products and still have little capacity to manufacture consumer products. In this we have failed. We have only made modest progress toward diversification as we envisioned it. Globalization has sent the jobs we sought in 1973 abroad . . . .

Although the patterns of trade have certainly changed – American markets are now much more important than they were in 1973 while Asia-Pacific markets are proportionately less important – the reliance on volatile export markets remains.

In his presentation to the 2003 conference, Dr. Jim Frank pointed to the relatively slow rate of economic transformation in the West, and to the fact that – in a comparative sense – the western Canadian economy is not as robust or as prosperous as is sometimes perceived.[3] He also noted that the commodity prices which underpin so much of the regional economy have steadily declined over the past thirty years in real dollar terms.

Finally, the economic discussions in 1973 and 2003 took place in quite different public policy climates. At the time of WEOC there was greater confidence in the capacity of public policies to address economic problems, and correspondingly less reliance on markets. The policy constraints of NAFTA and balanced budgets were not yet in sight. The participants at the 2003 conference shared a more limited public policy vision, and were less likely to endorse the forms of direct financial and regulatory interventions that were very much on the table in 1973.

2. The demographic and economic transformation of western Canada since 1973 is fully documented in Robert Roach, *State of the West 2003: Western Canadian Demographic and Economic Trends* (Calgary: Canada West Foundation, 2003). Copies are available for download at www.cwf.ca.

3. Dr. Frank's presentation drew from the Conference Board of Canada report, *Insights on Western Canada: A Socio-economic Report* (2003).

Given this important change in public policy context, what did the *Ottawa and the West* participants suggest in terms of the federal government's future engagement in the regional economy? The discussions highlighted a number of important themes:

Jim Dinning, Executive Vice President, TransAlta

- Economic diversification remains a regional policy priority.

- National economic policy, for good or for ill, remains critically important for regional economic prosperity. The relationship with Ottawa is one that must be managed, not ignored.

- In the WEOC era, there was a concern that strong provinces might run counter to a strong Canada; now it is more commonly argued that economic prosperity rests on both provincial and national strength, that the two are complementary.

- In the WEOC era, financial support from Ottawa was seen as an essential policy lever for economic diversification. In today's environment, there is less reliance on financial support and a greater reliance on sound fiscal management on the part of the national government, and on innovation and competition policies that create a level playing field across the country. In the words of Louis Hyndman, "Western Diversification is not just a funnel for federal dollars and programs for the West; it is now a clearinghouse for ideas out to the rest of Canada."

- The regional transportation grid remains a key determinant of regional economic prosperity, although the focus has shifted somewhat from rail to roads and air. The need for regional and national transportation policies has not diminished.

- WEOC did not address the need for national energy security planning; the need for such planning, albeit in a continental context, continues today.

- In 1973, Aboriginal peoples were not part of WEOC, and Aboriginal issues were not part of the WEOC agenda. This oversight cannot be repeated as western Canadians contemplate the determinants of future economic prosperity.

- There is a tendency for the federal government to see western economic concerns as regional rather than national issues. Given the importance of the western Canadian economy, it is essential that national policies be examined in terms of their regional effects, and that regional issues be examined in terms of their national effects. Regional aspirations must be firmly rooted in the national fabric.

- Federal-provincial entanglement in program design, finance and delivery is inevitable. However, this does not preclude more effective management of this important relationship.

- Many of the dominant economic spheres in the West are more than industries or businesses; they reflect and express a regional way of life. Sensitivity to this reality should be an essential part of how the federal government handles its economic relationship with the West.

One of the primary conclusions of the *Ottawa and the West* conference, and indeed a conclusion that is evident from the WEOC deliberations, is that debates on national economic policy are thoroughly entangled with debates about the need for a more effective political voice for the West in national political institutions. This entanglement was clear in 1973, clear in the 2003 reflections on WEOC, and clear in the conference discussions about the future of Ottawa's economic relationship with the West. To again quote Premier Lougheed's opening statement at WEOC: "The concerns of the West are more than a matter of dollars, or job security, or even economic opportunity, important as these are. It's a feeling of western Canadians that we have a great deal going for us in the West, but we feel frustrated in reaching out for our potential because we sense such potential is not fully understood or appreciated in central Canada and hence, we are thwarted by federal government policies."

David Barrett, Allan Blakeney, and Louis Hyndman at the *Ottawa and the West* conference

## *Conclusions and Recommendations*

> We no longer have the luxury of arguing among ourselves over small matters when we have much larger challenges from beyond our borders.
>
> – Dr. Allan Tupper at the Ottawa and the West Conference

At the opening of WEOC, and as noted in the outset of this report, Prime Minister Trudeau declared that WEOC "signifies the Government of Canada's belief that, a century after the old national policy, we can now together begin shaping a new national policy to strengthen Canada by achieving more balanced and diversified regional growth throughout the country." WEOC, no matter what its accomplishments, fell short in this respect. But, should the goal be abandoned, and should the WEOC format be set aside as an interesting but failed vehicle through which this goal could be pursued? No, it should not.

A second WEOC, held shortly after the anticipated 2004 general election, would give western Canadians the opportunity to see their national government addressing regional concerns and aspirations in an open forum. It would strengthen interprovincial cooperation within the region and, if successful, significantly improve the temper of federal-provincial relations. It would provide an opportunity for provincial governments in the West to speak to their own residents, and to the country at large. WEOC II would provide an important platform for communicating the hopes and aspirations of the West to a national audience, and indeed to a regional audience.

At the time of WEOC, the northern territories were not part of the intergovernmental scene in western Canada, and they have only recently been incorporated into the Western Premiers' Conference. The question arises, therefore, as to whether the territorial governments should be included in WEOC II. Here we would argue that a WEOC-like event for the three northern territories would make more sense than trying to fold the territories into WEOC II

***Recommendation:***

***Shortly after the next general election, the Government of Canada should convene WEOC II. This event should provide a model for similar meetings with the Atlantic provinces and northern territories.***

Underscoring this recommendation is the ongoing need for western Canadians to tell their story, to express their aspirations and expectations upon the national stage. While a second WEOC would provide an important stage for this, the effort must extend well beyond the federal-provincial domain. "Telling the West's story" calls for a chorus of voices, among which will continue to be the Canada West Foundation.

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## *Appendix A: Ottawa and the West Conference Program*

**OTTAWA AND THE WEST:**
**Reflections on the Western Economic Opportunities Conference of 1973**
**October 17, 2003**
**The Kahanoff Centre, Calgary, Alberta**

| | |
|---|---|
| 8:30-8:45 am | Welcome and Opening Remarks<br>James K. Gray, Chairman, Canada West Foundation |
| 8:45-9:00 am | Overview and Legacy of WEOC<br>Roger Gibbins, President and CEO, Canada West Foundation |
| 9:00-10:15 am | Reflections on the 1973 Western Economic Opportunities Conference<br>Session Chair: Roger Gibbins, President and CEO, Canada West Foundation<br>Hon. David Barrett, Former Premier of British Columbia<br>Hon. Allan Blakeney, Former Premier of Saskatchewan<br>Louis Hyndman, Former Minister of Federal and Intergovernmental Affairs, Government of Alberta |
| 10:30-Noon | Lessons from the Western Economic Opportunities Conference<br>Session Chair: Peter Meekison, CWF Board Member<br>Jim Eldridge, Government of Manitoba<br>Oryssia Lennie, Government of Canada<br>Greg Marchildon, Canada Research Chair in Public Policy and Economic History, University of Regina |
| 1:15-1:35 pm | State of the West: Demographic and Economic Trends in the West Since WEOC<br>Robert Roach, Senior Policy Analyst, Canada West Foundation |
| 1:35-2:15 pm | Insights on Western Canada: A Socio-economic Report<br>Jim Frank, Executive Advisor, The Conference Board of Canada |
| 2:15-3:15 pm | Options for Managing the Federal Government's Engagement in the Western Canadian Economy<br>Session Chair: Raymond Blake, Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy<br>Paul Boothe, University of Alberta<br>Graham Parsons, Organisation for Western Economic Cooperation<br>Allan Tupper, University of British Columbia |
| 3:30-4:45 pm | Plenary Discussion: Managing the Federal Government's Engagement<br>Session Chair: Loleen Berdahl, Director of Research, Canada West Foundation |
| 4:45-5:00 pm | Conference Conclusions and Wrap-up<br>Roger Gibbins, President and CEO, Canada West Foundation |
| 7:00-10:00 pm | Conference Dinner<br>Keynote address by the Hon. Ralph Goodale, Government of Canada<br>Remarks by The Rt. Hon. Ed Schreyer, Former Premier of Manitoba |

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# Appendix C: List of WEOC Participants*

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*This list is a copy of the list of participants that appears in the verbatim record of the conference (Government of Canada 1977). Unlike the original list, the names within sections (except for the prime minister and the premiers) have been placed in alphabetical order as has the order of the provinces.*

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